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## **A Post-Marxist Look at Pre-Marxism." Review of Warren Breckman, Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self**

**By Derek Stanovsky**

**M**arx is dead. Long live Marx. Such a slogan still has appeal even in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the jarring political transformations in Eastern Europe, and the attendant crises these have provoked within almost every strand of Marxian theory. Marx's own time was similarly marked by a series of turbulent social, political, and economic upheavals, all of which helped shape and produce Marxism. So it should come as little surprise that this newest wave of global crises has spurred renewed interest in Marxism, in its origins, and in its continued contemporary relevance. In his 1999 Cambridge University Press book, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self*, Warren Breckman provides us with a post-Marxist intellectual history of pre-Marxist social and political thought. Favoring a more nuanced account of the relationship between the overtly political writings of the young Marx and the more theologically oriented Young Hegelians, Breckman emphasizes the continuities and shared concerns that exist between the two rather than their more commonly highlighted disparities.

For Breckman, the debates concerning civil society within German philosophy during the 1830s and early 1840s are deeply embedded in both political and theological contexts. As he writes, "the constellation of concerns involved in the question of civil society—the relationship between society and the state, individual and community, economics and politics, the private person and the public citizen, self-interest and altruism—were intimately tied to religious questions" (4-5). Breckman finds fresh relevance for this history in the current debates over civil society and its progressive possibilities for democratic politics. The author takes as his point of departure the concept of "personality," particularly as it is encountered in arguments for and against various versions of "Christian personalism" in debates surrounding Hegel. Breckman argues that this concept provides a link between theological and political disputes such that: "The Young Hegelians' rejection of Christian personalism thus furnishes us with a

key to understanding their revolt against religion, monarchy, and bourgeois civil society" (10). It is against this background that Breckman traces the development of Marx's earliest theories.

The book begins with a discussion of Hegel's conservative theological critics, whose concerns tended to focus on Hegel's supposed pantheism. Breckman traces a line of argument stretching from the critique of rationalist theology in F. H. Jacobi through the vicissitudes of F. W. Schelling's Positive Philosophy to the anti-Hegelian political theology of Julius Stahl and connects these critics to various forms of personalism. In every case, as an antidote to the perceived excesses of Hegel's philosophy where Christianity seemed in danger of being swallowed up by the inexorable movement of the Hegelian dialectic, "Hegel's opponents all sought to recover the 'living,' 'free,' 'actual,' 'personal' God" (42). For Stahl, this return to personalism served not only to shore up more traditional Protestant theology, but also to support his reactionary political theories for the restoration of the Prussian monarchy and against the wave of democratic republicanism which had swept across Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. Thus, Hegel's rationalism was seen as a threat not only to orthodox religion but to orthodox politics as well. Breckman argues that the conservative response to Hegel was an attempt to place both religious authority and political authority firmly back into the hands of a personal God and a personal monarch.

Hegel's more radical critics also had their discontents with the Hegelian system. Breckman offers a novel reading of Ludwig Feuerbach's early theological and philosophical works in this context as simultaneously constituting a social and political critique of what he terms "Christian civil society" (90 ff.). Breckman argues that Feuerbach came to view Christian personalism in particular, and Protestantism in general, as sources of a socially divisive individualism. Thus, Feuerbach saw his task as the liberation of politics from the pernicious influence of Christianity. In an 1828 letter to Hegel, Feuerbach wrote that, "it is a question of overthrowing from its throne the ego, the *self* in general, which, especially since the beginning of Christianity, has dominated the world, which has conceived itself as the only spirit to exist" (1). Breckman argues that the roots of Young Hegelian radical social theory can be found in two principle sources. The first lies in the politically charged battles occasioned by David Strauss' controversial use of Hegel in his 1835 book *The Life of Jesus*. This event had a galvanizing effect on both "Left" and "Right" Hegelians and transformed an otherwise esoteric theological dispute into a political debate on the legitimacy of the Christian Prussian State and of the Prussian monarchy. The second source can be traced to the German reception of French social theory. In particular, Breckman argues that the Christian socialism of Saint-Simonianism injected a new concern for social issues into German theology and philosophy. Coupled with the growing poverty of a large segment of the population, Saint-Simonian ideas resonated both with German social conditions as well as with Young Hegelian critiques of personalist theology. Breckman pursues these themes through close readings of Eduard Gans, Marx's Hegelian political philosophy professor at the University of Berlin; the social theologies of Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess, and August Cieszkowski; Ludwig Feuerbach (with a plausible, if

somewhat speculative, account of possible Saint-Simonian influences on his work); and a chapter on Arnold Ruge, one the most politically engaged of the Young Hegelians.

The final chapter of this book focuses on Karl Marx and the ways in which his early work fits into the overlapping contexts provided by the religious, social, philosophical, and political concerns of the Young Hegelians. Breckman argues that Marx's critiques of individualism and bourgeois civil society are best understood as emerging from his engagement with the Young Hegelian critiques of political theology in general, and Christian personalism in particular, rather than from any systematic critique of political liberalism. Breckman finds support for this claim in Marx's very early college writings and dissertation but especially in his 1843 essays "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law" and "On the Jewish Question." Breckman writes that in the first essay Marx takes as his target not just the modern bureaucratic state and private property, but also the personal monarch such that: "If sovereignty exists as the private right of the monarch, then sovereignty is private property, and private property is sovereign. Sovereignty and private property stand or fall together by virtue of the idea of transcendent personhood" (289). In the second essay, Marx then "completed the transfer of his analysis of Christian personalism from the monarch to the postrevolutionary liberal state," arguing that the emancipation of politics from religion and the freeing of individuals from the realm of civil society and their transformation into citizens of the state was insufficient for true human freedom (291).

Writing an intellectual history of Karl Marx is always a vexing endeavor since Marx's own theories of historical materialism and ideology tend to militate against the possibility of such a project. However, perhaps Marx paid too little heed to the material aspects of ideological production. The writings of the Young Hegelians did not take place only in the mind, but also in a context that included the censorship and arrest of professors such as the Göttingen Seven, and within very real academic labor histories including political intrigues over teaching appointments and stipends that contributed to Marx's loss of an academic career and his subsequent exile and poverty. These constitute material conditions even by Marx's standards. Breckman's history sheds welcome light on these events and rehabilitates a crucial line of intellectual debate formative for Marx's early thought. However, there are moments when Breckman seems less than sympathetic to Marxian theory. For instance, in writing on pauperism in Germany in the 1830s, Breckman states: "It is now generally agreed that the economic source of this acute crisis lay in too little, not too much, industrialization" (149). This general agreement probably does not extend to many Marxists for whom Marx's analysis of rising unemployment as a predictable consequence of capitalism remains as salient today as in 1830. This is particularly true given the ongoing economic crises in the Third World and World Bank policies which continue to see capital not as the cause but as the cure.

Similarly, Breckman may overstate the degree of "consensus" that currently exists among scholars with regard to "the shortcomings of Marx's critique of civil society" (2). Breckman quotes Michel Foucault from *The History of Sexuality* who writes that, "the representation of power has remained under the spell of monarchy. In political thought

and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king" (302). However, the revival of civil society as a category of analysis and its crowning as a "normative ideal," something Breckman endorses, may be yet another way of avoiding this regicide (2). Conversely, Breckman may understate the distance that separates various post-Marxist theorists. For instance, while it may be true as Breckman states that Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato in their book *Civil Society and Political Theory* seek to retrieve a normative concept of civil society as a way around current impasses in political theory, this could not be truly said of many poststructuralist post-Marxist critics such as Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx*. However, some of these poststructuralist theorists might fit into what Breckman sees as a general return to Hegel. In Slavoj Žižek's book *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, also published in 1999, Žižek pursues the characteristically perverse and idiosyncratic project of a manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity. For the first third of the book he does this through an exploration of the self as articulated within German Idealism, especially in Hegel. This same interest in Hegel can also be found in the even more recent book by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek entitled *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. In these books, the project is not the restoration of a normative civil society, but both are animated by an appreciation of the power and relevance of Hegel even for current poststructuralist political theories. Thus, Breckman is certainly right to insist that the view of the self matters crucially for political philosophy, and that contemporary debates within post-Marxism often hinge on just such questions concerning the self. Given this, Breckman's book is a timely retelling of those earlier debates surrounding the self which so decisively shaped nineteenth-century European political thought and which have special relevance today as the lines of debate are redrawn for the twenty-first century.